

## Critics of Religious Orthodoxy

*This essay is an excerpt from my book, Values for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, published in 2017*

Facing authoritarian oppression by church authorities, some individuals courageously researched and promoted alternative values. Through transcending the traditional hierarchy they advanced openness, independent thinking, and transparency within their organized religion; some also advocated dialogue with other religions.

The prime example remains **Martin Luther** (1483-1546), who almost singlehandedly began the Protestant Reformation. He opposed the then-common Catholic practice of having people buy indulgences to free themselves from sin. Church authorities used the funds for the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, a project that began in 1506. Luther also opposed celibacy of priests and denial of burial rights for suicides.<sup>1</sup> In 1527 he posted his 95 Theses to promote church reform and had them translated into German the following year. Among other points, Luther questioned papal authority to forgive sins, stating that only God had the power to do so. Thesis 86 also posed the question:

Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of Saint Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?

In addition, Luther angered the Pope by translating the Bible into German, thus undercutting the power of priests to interpret scripture. The printing press turned Luther's translation into a bestseller. Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther in 1520 after the latter refused to retract his writings, and declared him an outlaw – anyone could assassinate him without penalty.<sup>2</sup> Only the protection of a German count, Friedrich, saved Luther's life. He had not intended to split the church, only to reform it. But Lutheranism became of force in its own right. Today it counts some 80 million followers, with ten times as many Protestants around the globe.

Other challenges to Papal authority cropped up in quick succession. French theologian **John Calvin** (1509-64), who initiated Calvinism, broke with the Catholic Church in 1530 – he eventually headed the church in Geneva. Four years later the Act of Supremacy declared **King Henri VIII** the head of the Church of England, ushering in the English Reformation. These critics ended the Catholic monopoly on interpreting Christian Church doctrine and matters of faith once and for all.

Catholic authorities often aligned themselves with autocratic heads of state, a fact which became a catalyst for the anti-religious excesses of the French Revolution (1789-99). The Russian people faced a similar situation. Terrorist attacks against the established order resulted. In 1881 Nihilists assassinated Tsar Alexander II, who had liberated Russia's serfs. The most celebrated Russian author, **Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy** (1828-1910), proposed non-violent resistance instead. His novel *Anna Karenina* (1878) reflects that philosophy. Tolstoy practiced the holistic lifestyle he advocated by avoiding alcohol, meat and smoking. Beginning in 1882 the tsarist authorities placed him under surveillance. His work, *The Kingdom of God is within You*, was first published in Germany in 1894 after Russia's authoritarian regime banned it in Tolstoy's home country. The following quote illustrates his pacifist beliefs:

How can Men Allow that Murder is Permissible while they Preach Principles of Morality, and How can they Allow of the Existence in their Midst of a Military Organization of Physical Force which is a Constant Menace to Public Security?—It is only Allowed by the Upper Classes, who Profit by this Organization, Because their Privileges are Maintained by it—The Upper Classes Allow it, and the Lower Classes Carry it into Effect in Spite of their Consciousness of the Immorality of the Deeds of Violence....<sup>3</sup>

The book left a lasting impression of the young Mohandas J. Gandhi, who corresponded with Tolstoy and named a new settlement in Transvaal after him. Tolstoy promoted a Christian, agrarian anarchism, rejecting tsarist authoritarianism as well as a dictatorship of the proletariat. This intellectual autonomy did not go unpunished. In 1901 the authorities of the Eastern Orthodox Church excommunicated him. Shielded by his international fame from additional recriminations, he spent his last years on his country estate with his wife, daughter and a group of devoted followers.

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** (1906-45), a Lutheran theologian, was not so lucky. He actively opposed the Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany, thus taking a stance against the Catholic Church's concordat with Hitler. Bonhoeffer's life and actions highlighted the need to reconcile faith with action in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He travelled to the United States in 1930 for postgraduate study under Reinhold Niebuhr, and a teaching fellowship at New York City's Union Theological Seminary. During that time Bonhoeffer also taught Sunday school at a church in Harlem.

Bonhoeffer was back in Germany during the Nazi takeover. Two days after Hitler became Chancellor he delivered a radio address in which he attacked the new regime and warned Germany against slipping into an idolatrous cult of the *Führer* (leader), who could very well turn out to be *Verführer* (mis-leader, or seducer). Bonhoeffer's broadcast was cut off in the middle of a sentence, though it remains unclear whether this happened at the behest of the Nazis.

Disheartened by the German Churches' complacency and collaboration with the Nazis by the autumn of 1933, Bonhoeffer accepted a two-year appointment as a pastor of two German-speaking Protestant churches in London, but was persuaded to return in 1935 to defend what remained of the German Church's independence. He thus passed up an opportunity to study non-violent resistance under Mahatma Gandhi. Instead, he became a founding member of the Confessional Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) that arose in opposition to Nazi attempts to control and subjugate German Protestantism.

Among Bonhoeffer's books, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) describes the demands of sacrifice and ethical consistency required by civic duty and Christian humanism. In February 1938 he secretly made contact with members of the German Resistance when his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnányi (1902-45) introduced him to a group seeking Hitler's overthrow. Two years later the Nazi government prohibited him from preaching, and the following year it also imposed a publication ban. In April 1943 authorities arrested Bonhoeffer, and executed him two years later on Hitler's orders, only one month before Germany's capitulation. Several branches of Christian churches venerate him as a martyr.

**Hans Küng** (1928-), a Swiss renegade theologian, is a prolific author and critic of Catholic orthodoxy. Küng supported Vatican II and admired Pope John XXIII. In his opinion that pope's successors diverged from his path. John Wilkins traced Küng's collision course with Catholic authorities:

In 1970, he had thrown down the gauntlet in his book *Infallible?: an Inquiry*. Papal infallibility, he contended, was the doctrine that made it so hard for the Catholic Church to admit and correct its mistakes. Instead, he proposed that the church should claim "indefectibility" -- that despite all errors, it would always be maintained by the Spirit in the truth.<sup>4</sup>

But this suggestion ran counter to established doctrine, promulgated in 1870 by the First Vatican Council. Far from repentant, Küng renewed the challenge when he released a critique of Pope John Paul II's first year as Pontiff in 1979. The Vatican retaliated by withdrawing Küng's licence to teach as a Catholic theologian. Although shocked by the censure, he continued his written work, occasionally speaking out against what he considered unjust.

In 1985, his *Christianity and the World Religions* considered Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. And in 2007 *Islam: Past, Present and Future* looked at Islam's challenges of the present and possibilities for the future. Küng's most famous quote:

No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.

The Swiss theologian established strong precedents for this course of action. In 2009, the year after the Financial Crisis, Küng prepared and signed a declaration in favour of a global economic ethic, along with a group of like-minded intellectuals. The declaration advanced moral values to prevent another financial disaster, including five universally applicable principles:

1. *Humanistic ethics*
2. *Non-violence and respect for life*
3. *Justice and solidarity*
4. *Honesty and tolerance*
5. *Mutual respect and partnership*<sup>5</sup>

In 2010 Küng argued that sex abuse required rethinking the Catholic celibacy rule, citing the fact that the church had not demanded celibacy of its priests for its first millennium of existence.<sup>6</sup> Now officially retired due to declining health, Küng nonetheless welcomed the election of Pope Francis in 2013 as a new opportunity for Catholicism.

**Irshad Manji** (1968-), a Uganda-born Canadian Muslim, advocates an open discussion on Islam and its excesses. The New York Times called her Osama Bin Laden's worst nightmare. Her 2004 book *The Trouble with Islam Today* made international headlines and has been translated into over 30 languages. Manji, who describes herself as a Muslim "Refusenik," describes the book's goal as follows:

This book is an open letter from me, a Muslim voice of change, to concerned citizens worldwide -- Muslim and not. It's about why my faith community needs to come to terms with the diversity of ideas, beliefs and people in our universe, and why non-Muslims have a pivotal role in helping us get there.

The themes I'm exploring with the utmost honesty include:

- the inferior treatment of women by Muslims;
- the Jew-bashing in which so many Muslims persistently engage; and
- the continuing scourge of slavery in countries ruled by Islamist regimes.

I appreciate that every faith has its share of literalists. Christians have their fundamentalists. Jews have the ultra-Orthodox. For God's sake, even Buddhists have absolutists. But what this book hammers home is that only in Islam today is literalism *mainstream*. Which means that when abuse happens under the banner of Islam, most Muslims have no clue how to dissent, debate, or reform ourselves.

In addition, Manji has founded and heads *Project Ijtihad*, a charitable organization that introduced a 24/7 service to advise people, especially young Muslims, who are struggling with faith. Ijtihad is an Islamic legal term that means "independent reasoning" or "the utmost effort an individual can put forth in an activity."

Her book *Allah, Liberty and Love* was released in June 2011. According to Manji, it teaches "the willingness to speak up when everyone else wants to shut you up. This book is the ultimate guide to becoming a gutsy global citizen." In addition she produces her own You Tube channel called *Moral Courage TV*. It challenges viewers with the question: "What do you stand for and what are you doing about it?" Manji's work has encouraged many moderate Muslims to speak out against extremism and to "re-discover Islam's lost tradition of independent thinking."

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Luther married Katharina von Bora in 1523 and had six children with her.

<sup>2</sup> The German term for this is “die Acht verhängt,” meaning social ostracism without legal protection for life or limb.

<sup>3</sup> Constance Garnett (1894). *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. English Translation of Tolstoy's original. New York.

<sup>4</sup> John Wilkins (2014). “Ripples spread out from Hans Küng's work.” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 2: <http://ncronline.org>

<sup>5</sup> Der Spiegel (2009). “Wirtschaftlicher Alltag: Theologe Küng mahnt ethisches Verhalten an.” October 7: [www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/wirtschaftlicher-alltag-theologe-kueng-mahnt-ethisches-verhalten-an-a-653743.html](http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/wirtschaftlicher-alltag-theologe-kueng-mahnt-ethisches-verhalten-an-a-653743.html)

<sup>6</sup> Hans Küng (2010). “Sex abuse requires rethinking of mandatory celibacy.” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 12.